

Nationwide strikes in Colombia and Chile; Buenos Aires teachers protest return to in person instruction

## Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

with a one hundred percent occupation of emergency care beds in private hospitals and clinics and 80 percent occupation for public hospitals.

### National strikes and demonstrations in Colombia amid COVID-19 resurgence

Beginning on Wednesday April 28, protest strikes and demonstrations took place across Colombia. The massive popular movement began as a protest against a regressive 2 billion dollar (US) tax hike on food, public transportation and other essential goods and services, proposed by right-wing president Ivan Duque and approved by the legislature.

The tax measure ignited an already explosive situation created by acceleration in the COVID-19 pandemic that threatens the nation's entire health system.

On May 2, a day after calling for the militarization of the country to drown the protests in blood, Duque called on Congress to rescind the tax measure. The announcement did not stop mass protests in defiance of police repression, in Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and other Colombian cities.

Three thousand troops were sent into Cali, the epicenter of the protests. Human rights groups gave a preliminary report that indicates that at least 8 people were killed in demonstrations in Cali, 28 were wounded [two of whom lost their sight] and 84 arrested.

### Buenos Aires teachers stage protest

Striking public school teachers in the city of Buenos Aires rallied Friday to protest this week's school reopening. The educators rallied at the Buenos Aires Obelisk monument. Many of the teachers denounced the anti-science policies of Buenos Aires Mayor Horacio Larreta. The mayor decreed the reopening of schools despite an increase in COVID-19 cases and deaths, including among elementary school students, in the context of an overburdened hospital system. Teachers who spoke at the rally pledged that they would not return to in-person teaching.

Two weeks ago, the Medical Doctors Private Sector Association reported that the city's medical infrastructure was in "near collapse,"

### 24-hour general strike in Chile demands president's ouster

Thousands of workers, employed by public agencies and private firms, took part in a general strike on April 30, in anticipation of May Day, demanding the resignation of President Sebastian Piñera. The strikers were joined by students and farm workers, and by advocates of democratic rights.

Protests continued nationwide on May 1. In the port city of Valparaíso, marchers carried banners that read: "Bread, jobs, health and dignity" and "Life with dignity means having the right to health!" The march followed the road bordering the port.

In addition to protests against the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, the strikers protested the Piñera administration's refusal to allow workers to use part of their government pension accounts to confront the economic crisis created by the pandemic. The strikers also demand an immediate freeze on prices for food and essential goods for the working class.

### Workers mark May Day with demonstrations across Mexico

On May first, International Workers Day, in defiance of their trade unions, workers marched in Mexico City, Veracruz, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Yucatan. In Guadalajara, where the "official" corporate union federations had announced that no May Day actions would be held, workers rallied anyway.

Another significant march took place in the industrial city of Puebla, location of auto parts and auto assembly plants operated by Fiat and Volkswagen. The protest included delegations of autoworkers marching under their banners demanding that workers' rights be respected in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also present were hospital workers, educators, and telephone workers who are fighting attempts by the Telemex phone monopoly to strip them of retirement rights.

## **In Manaus, Brazil, thousands march against President Bolsonaro's visit**

On April 30, thousands marched in the city of Manaus, capital of Amazonia State, against the declaration of President Jair Bolsonaro an "Amazonian citizen." The honor was bestowed by the state legislature on April 20.

Demonstrators denounced Bolsonaro for his indifference to the indigenous population of the region and for his criminal mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic. Francy Junior, a woman's rights activist, denounced the president, stating "Bolsonaro is responsible for over 12,000 [COVID-19] deaths in our state."

## **Strike by workers against Prysmian Group plant in east Texas enters second month**

Workers at the plant operated by Prysmian Group in Scottsville, Texas are entering their second month on strike with no progress in talks between management and the United Auto Workers (UAW) reported.

Last week UAW members from the Dallas area travelled to Scottsville, outside of Marshall near the Louisiana border, to join the 200 striking workers on the picket line.

A major issue for workers is the plant's 24/7 operation. Workers are demanding to increase the number of times they can refuse overtime. Right now, they are only allowed five such refusals a year.

In March 2020, the UAW had agreed to postpone contract talks for one year due to the pandemic, however when talks resumed this March things quickly reached an impasse, with management offering a pay raise of five cents per hour while imposing higher out-of-pocket health care costs on workers.

The Scottsville plant manufactures cables for power lines and telecommunications systems. Prysmian Group is a transnational cable maker headquartered in Milan, Italy and boasted sales of over 10 billion euros in 2020. It operates 23 plants in North America, 48 in Europe, 13 in Latin America, 13 in the Asia-Pacific and 7 in the Middle East and Africa.

## **Mississippi teachers decry stingy pay raises**

Mounting anger has roiled Mississippi teachers after the state legislature secretly passed a bill last March in the waning hours of the legislative session that called for miserly annual wage increases of \$1,000 for veteran teachers and \$1,100 for new teachers.

The Facebook page—Pay Raise for Mississippi Teachers—drew widespread interest and one post declared, "We have nearly 40,000 followers of this page. It is time we discuss what it will take to organize a teacher strike."

Mississippi is the poorest state in the nation, with a poverty rate of over 19 percent compared to a national average of 10 percent. Average starting wages for teachers are around \$35,890. The state average, according to the Southern Regional Education Board, is

\$45,105. This sharply contrasts to the national average in 2018-19 of \$62,304.

Both the American Federation of Teachers-Mississippi and the NEA-affiliate Mississippi Association of Educators paid lip service to the anger of teachers. But they warned of the consequences of a strike given harsh Mississippi laws.

Mississippi teachers struck only once, in 1985, when the NEA endorsed a strike and 22 members of the executive board sustained \$250 fines and were sentenced to serve two days in jail. The jail sentences were dropped after they agreed to comply with the state's injunction against strikes.

## **Mississippi school bus drivers force rollback of cuts after two-day work stoppage**

The 20 bus drivers for Mississippi's Greenville Public School District (GPSD) ended their work stoppage April 27 after the board of trustees rescinded an order passed back in March to cut hours. The drivers are classified as working 5-hour, 6-hour or 7-hour days. The board originally cut all drivers back to 5-hour days, or 25 hours per week.

On April 23, drivers received a notice about the cuts and without any organization, they walked out for two days starting April 26. The action was taken despite state laws that bar striking.

Driver Lolanda Lewis said she and her co-workers sought a meeting with the board, but district superintendent Debra Dace said the board "didn't want to meet with them."

The cuts for drivers came on top of devastating reductions in living standards due to the pandemic. Many had to drop health care and other supplemental insurance as a result, and none received hazard pay.

## **Nestle chocolate bar workers strike in Toronto**

About 470 workers at Nestle's confections factory in Toronto struck this past weekend after negotiations for a new contract broke down. The workers, members of Unifor, are demanding the resolution of a long-term dispute over the company's use of temporary workers in the plant.

Employing a large number of workers on full-time hours but on a temporary basis, Nestle's has been able to deny these workers access to benefits and top wages while reducing hours at will. Workers struck over the same gig economy issue in 2017. Workers who are currently entitled to benefits are also demanding higher company contributions to their pension plan.



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